

# In Conversation: Venâncio Massingue



Dr Venâncio Massingue, Vice Rector of the University Eduardo Mondlane (UEM) in Mozambique.

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*Dr Venâncio Massingue is Mozambique's information and communication technologies (ICTs) champion. Vice-Rector of the University Eduardo Mondlane (UEM), he bridges the worlds of academia and politics. He has used his knowledge of both these worlds to help bring Mozambique into the "information age." He has been successful, but, given the challenges his country faces, he also still has a long road ahead.*

*Dr Massingue was born in a village 275 kilometres from Mozambique's capital, Maputo, in "one of those little round houses" that dot the Mozambiquan countryside. His father died when he was seven, leaving his mother to raise four children on her own. A woman with no "formal education who didn't know how to write," his mother had a very "strong influence" on his life, he says.*

*Throughout his life, Dr Massingue has made the most of the opportunities presented to him. His father's brother provided him with a place to stay in Maputo so he could attend school. Later, when his uncle moved to Namaacha and opened a bar, the young Massingue went with him. Working for him before and after school, he eventually earned enough to attend technical school where he studied electricity. Technical school whetted his appetite for learning and he soon found himself at UEM pursuing a degree in engineering. His stint in engineering was cut short when the Director of the UEM's informatics centre plucked the promising student from his studies and introduced him to computers.*

*It was during his time at Delft University in Holland, however, that the energetic engineer began to formulate some of his ideas about how ICTs might help shape his country's development path.*

*Dr Massingue spoke to IDRC Reports online magazine about his experience and the role of ICTs in development.*

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## **Can technology accelerate a country's development?**

Yes, but you have to define development. I believe that whatever we do should be people-centred and should aim to improve the quality of life — health, education, and, socioeconomic position — of each person. The question is then, "what role can technology play to contribute to these definitions."

My government has what are called "five year plans," where decisions are made on what needs to be done. Education is a priority, health is a priority, etc. We looked at these and asked how technology could help. And the marriage — if you want to call it that — between the government plan and technological tools has been excellent in some areas.

## **Can you give some examples?**

In the '80s and beginning of the '90s, when people around the world thought about Mozambique, two phenomena came to mind: hunger and war. I wondered: "What can we do to make people realize that there is something else?". So I started a small research project that led to the establishment of the Internet in Mozambique. Now, instantly, people can have accurate information about Mozambique.

But with the Internet and email, we then asked "what can we do to move this beyond academia?." And that is where the model of telecentres came from. Rural communities in Mozambique have problems with communications, with getting information. By putting telecentres in place, people in these communities can obtain information quickly. Telecentres can facilitate access to education.

## **You were able to garner support from Mozambique's prime minister and president for your work. This has been translated into a national ICT policy. How did you achieve that?**

In 1992, I developed a model that became the new Centre for Informatics at the UEM (CIUEM). It took three, four years but the results we produced were very solid. We brought the Internet to Mozambique and set up a computer maintenance centre at the university. Maybe these seem like funny stories, but in the '80s, if anything broke down we had to send it to either South Africa or Europe.

In 1996, I organized an international symposium (the International Symposium on Informatics and Development: A World in Transition). One of the themes was how to develop a national information policy. I invited most of the Cabinet members, including the prime minister. After this the prime minister said, "I want you, the centre (CIEUM), to prepare a policy."

I suggested that what would be better would be some sort of task force led by the prime minister or president. He accepted that and took on the job. So my bosses — if you want to call them that — have vision and a good sense of things, of what will work and what will not.

## **Can you tell me how you “fed” the policy process?**

The process had two sides: scientific and political. A lot of groundwork had already been done and we were looking for moral, technical, and material resources to support the initiative we had started. So when the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) began supporting ICTs in Africa in 1996 through the [Acacia](#) initiative, the first project we submitted was to create the secretariat, the Mozambique Acacia Advisory Committee Secretariat (MAACS). We needed something to serve as a reference point, a body to energize the process. So the role of MAACS was and is to do the academic, scientific thinking, and feed the processes going on.

We knew we wanted an ICT policy — there were many people talking about this, but they did not know what it was. In our minds it was very important to demonstrate by doing. So we decided to undertake two pilot projects to validate the process.

First, we began with the idea of supporting communities, of looking at things that have an impact on the community. That is where the idea of a telecentre came from. We knew we wanted something to empower people by using technology. We wanted something people could see. For example, they could go to a remote area and see people using technology. This way they would know this is not the fantasy of politicians and academicians!

Then I set up a team with members from CIEUM, the African Study Centre, the Faculty of Economics, and from our telecom company, Telecomunicacoes de Mozambique (TDM). The team developed a research document on Mozambican telecentres because the meaning of telecentre is different in different countries and we needed our own. This is how the first telecentres were born.

Second, we also realized that the majority of our people are young. So we thought it was very important to create a project targeting youth. This was [SchoolNet Mozambique](#), and we made sure we had people from the Ministry of Education on this team.

These two projects were instrumental in providing feedback to the process of developing policy.

**What would you say are some of the key lessons others — donors, for example — could learn from your experience?**

First, you want to be clear that you want to change the way things are being done; you want to change for the better. So the main message is: we must be critical of the way things are done.

Second, you have to identify, or create, or contribute to the creation of champions at all levels. Most of the things I have done were possible because people said "We think you can do it." This is very important. You have to empower, you have to support what the Americans call "champions" at all levels.

Third, I think it is very important to listen to what people say is relevant to them. This is not a simple issue. Sometimes donors have their own priorities and ways of doing things. New ideas can disturb these, but it is important that they find ways of accommodating new ideas because very small ideas can become very big.

For example, the first time I connected Mozambique to the Internet I had a "286" (megahertz) computer and a 300 baud modem. Now we have a two-megabit connection, a satellite, and many, many more people using the Internet. So, you have to appreciate the potential in a seed. What we are talking about now started at the end of the 1980s and it is only at the end of the 1990s that we really started harvesting the fruits of our labour.

Fourth — and for me this is very critical — is the need to create a critical mass of knowledge. It is very important that you have people who can carry out research, who can do technical work, and who utilize technology correctly. In Mozambique we are straining educational and human resources now, so we must work very hard.

Fifth, it is very important to maintain an element of research in what you do, because research brings knowledge and knowledge can influence policies. Policies, when well implemented, can bring the desired development. So it is very important that in all programs, a research program be always present.

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*In 2000, Mozambique's Council of Ministers approved a national ICT policy — the first in Africa. A year later, in a speech he delivered to an international symposium convened to translate Mozambique's ICT policy into an implementation plan, the country's president, Joaquim Chissano, said: "I call on members of the Government and of civil society to exercise dynamic leadership and not to neglect any legal or regulatory means to create a favourable environment for the development of ICTs in the country, in such a way as to properly and adequately provide its multiple benefits to the people."*

*In June 2002, Mozambique's Council of Ministers approved the National ICT Policy Implementation Strategy. The strategy will provide the framework and entry points for development partners to support the country's ICT Policy. The work of Dr Massingue and his team has come full circle: research has informed policy to shape development.*

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## **For more information:**

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